



CONTACT

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**JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

As the most recent buzzword occupying the minds of Jewish professionals — replacing “continuity,” “renaissance” and “Matisyahu” — the term “Peoplehood” has been given much attention lately as the newfound rhetorical panacea in Jewish life.

But what exactly is “Peoplehood”? Is it just another empty phrase carted out by Jewish communal professionals determined to keep Jews procreating with other Jews? Or does it have intrinsic meaning beyond catch-phrase pabulum? Where does Peoplehood end and tribalism begin? Is it possible to articulate Peoplehood in a manner that is inspiring yet not exclusionary?

The hazards of “Peoplehood” were on full display in a recent Op-Ed in the Forward by the Founding President of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute. The author claimed that the needs of Peoplehood — specifically, the survival of the Jewish People — demanded an abrogation of morality in every issue (Turkey, China) that might have even a tertiary effect on Israel or on Jews. Leaving aside questions of ethics and morality, the fact that such viewpoints might actually reduce the number of Jews who want to belong to such a People did not seem to concern the author. It would appear that for some, Jewish Peoplehood is a cause to rally around even if its constituents number in the tens.

This issue of CONTACT explores the idea of Jewish Peoplehood from a wide variety of perspectives. Included are contemplations on the meaning and purpose of Peoplehood, on language as unifier of the Jewish People, and even on the possibility that Peoplehood is a destructive concept in Judaism. In the end, the many voices presented here offer evidence that if there is indeed such a thing as Peoplehood, it is defined by a multiplicity of viewpoints — a reflection of the compelling diversity of contemporary Jewish life.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley



THE PRIMACY OF PEOPLEHOOD

MORDECAI KAPLAN'S CONCEPT REMAINS AS RADICAL, AND AS POWERFUL, AS EVER

by RABBI DAN EHRENKRANTZ

Peoplehood is a concept so deeply ingrained in those closely involved with Jewish life that we forget it's a relatively new construct. Credit for introducing the idea belongs to Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism.

In his 1934 book, *Judaism As a Civilization*, Kaplan talked a lot about Jewish "nationhood." Yet just a few years later, he had become uncomfortable with the term. He even turned down a reprinting request because, among other things, he felt that "nationhood," as applied to the Jewish people, had come to be closely identified with statehood, and was, therefore, in need of being replaced by "Peoplehood."

The first time I know of that Kaplan used the term Peoplehood was in the November 27, 1942, issue of *The Reconstructionist*, the movement's journal. By 1948, he had fully developed the concept, laying it out in *The Future of the American Jew*. Although Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer have lamented that "[t]he once-forceful claims of Jewish 'peoplehood' have lost their power to compel" (*Whatever Happened to the Jewish People*, Commentary, June 2006), we need to remember that this concept, which we take for granted, was considered radical not too long ago. To reinvigorate the idea of Peoplehood, we must recapture its radical nature.

Kaplan's purpose in developing the idea of Peoplehood was to create an understanding of Judaism broad enough to include everyone who identified as a Jew regardless of one's individual understanding of or approach to that identity. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, Judaism was generally seen as either a system of behaviors (the Orthodox position) or one of beliefs (the Reform stance). Kaplan found both approaches lacking. He saw in the idea of Peoplehood a way to transcend these approaches by suggesting a sense of *belonging* as primary to the Jewish experience.

Kaplan arrived at this approach well before the ethnic pride movement of later decades. In fact, America's melting-pot ide-

ology of the time called for the submergence, rather than the promotion, of ethnic differences. Comfort with hyphenated identities (e.g., Irish-American, Italian-American) came much later. In effect, Kaplan's Peoplehood concept was a challenge not only to the status quo within the Jewish world, but within the larger culture as well.

Kaplan's immediate hope was that a strong sense of communal identity would strengthen Jews' connection to Jewish life and to each other — something he felt was in danger of being weakened by the restrictive visions of the Orthodox and Reform movements. But his ultimate goal was nothing less than universal salvation, a healing of the world brought about by people's commitment to one another.

Kaplan was radical in proposing an organizing principle, Peoplehood, that ran counter to the American ethos of the day, transcended Jews' understanding of what lay at the root of their identity, and insisted that the Jewish enterprise was not an end in itself. While the ethical culturists and the Reform were also engaged with universal rather than merely parochial concerns, the idea that there was value in a multi-faith, multicultural world was revolutionary. Kaplan understood that people are shaped by their cultures and civilizations, and that groups have greater power than individuals to help bring about a world of peace and wholeness. He also fervently believed that a revitalized Jewish people could use its wisdom and energy to serve all of humanity and, in the process, strengthen itself.

The concept of Peoplehood continues to be radical today. It is a formidable counterpoint to the glib universalism that ignores the power of religions and cultures to attract and shape adherents, and it flies in the face of our society's consumer-inspired individualism. Kaplan's vision makes clear that if we are to act on our connections to others, we have to align ourselves with groups to which we feel naturally obligated. Most of us recognize the sense of obligation that comes from being part of a family; Peoplehood insists that our obligations go beyond our families to our people.

There are many Jewish institutions that

cultivate this sense of shared purpose, and chief among them is the synagogue. By creating a culture of interdependence and communal responsibility, synagogues are particularly effective at combating our culture's celebration of the purely individual and transitory.

Israel also plays an important and special role in bolstering Peoplehood. The visceral sense of being part of the Jewish people that comes from spending time there lies behind the power of programs like Taglit-Birthright Israel. Engaging in day-to-day life in Israel can be both inspiring and dispiriting. But whatever our individual experiences, being in Israel means coming face-to-face with the living reality of Jewish nationhood, both in the modern sense of the word and in the sense of Peoplehood which Kaplan wrote about.

Making Peoplehood primary implies that Judaism is, at its core, a family of families, which is Kaplan's definition of a civilization. It means that while Judaism contains beliefs, creed is not primary; while it contains time-tested patterns of behavior, *halakha* is not primary. Embracing Judaism as a civilization, as an ever-changing, evolving family of families rather than as a divinely-ordained belief or behavioral system means embracing a people-centered Jewish life.

What makes this concept radical is its outward focus. Peoplehood demands that our attachments to each other serve a greater purpose than our own, our family's, or even our immediate community's well-being; and that those attachments be part of a multi-faith, multicultural effort to make the world a better place for all its inhabitants. By harnessing the power of culture and religion, Peoplehood has the potential to be a powerful force for change. Using that force to confront the major challenges of our time is perhaps our chief obligation as 21st-Century Jews.

It's easy to pay lip service to the idea of Peoplehood without accepting its radical nature. Making Peoplehood primary means nothing less than fully embracing that radicalism and using it to change the way we define Jewish life and order our individual and communal priorities. ■

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Jewish Peoplehood & Young Adults

by LEONARD SAXE

Is Jewish Peoplehood, a sense that all Jews are connected and responsible for one another, an archaic notion irrelevant to modern Jews? Are young Jewish adults in the vanguard of a shift away from Jewish values of communal connection and concern? Although secular research underscores this concern, in the Jewish community, recent developments suggest a different scenario.

General survey data of American young adults indicates that they view fellow members of Generation Y as more concerned with becoming rich and famous than with being communal or spiritual. They are, these surveys suggest, a group of individualists who worry about money and possessions and are, seemingly, blasé about their relationships and about the needs of others.

To the extent that young Jewish adults share the outlook of this generation, the prospects for fostering Jewish Peoplehood seem bleak. But how, then, do we explain the success of the American Jewish community's largest-ever social experiment, Taglit-Birthright Israel, a collective experience whose key reward is in the currency of Jewish Peoplehood?

Since its inception in late 1999, Birthright has provided educational trips for more than 125,000 North American young adults. Almost universally, participants report that their trips are extraordinary experiences. When they return, they talk about what they have learned about the land of Israel, but mostly they reflect on how it feels to share a connection with other Jews.

The program provides young adults, whose backgrounds vary dramatically in terms of prior contact with Jewish life, with an opportunity to feel that they are a part of the Jewish People. Unlike the ritualized Passover seder, where Jews

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reenact their people's historic journey to the promised land, Birthright Israel is an actual experience. Even among young adults immersed in the 24/7 world of text messaging and computer-mediated social networking, it seems that there is a thirst for genuine interaction and experience. Birthright allows participants to connect the dots of their nascent Jewish identities.

Evidence that the active ingredient underlying Birthright Israel is a sense of connection (a key element of Jewish Peoplehood) comes from systematic evaluation data about the program. On multiple surveys, the dominant response from participants is that the experience felt like a "journey to their Jewish roots" and "a group Jewish experience." The opportunity to live for ten days with a group of fellow Jews, and to do so in the land of Israel, alters their social identities. It makes being part of a Jewish group not simply a religious statement, but also an affirmative statement of Jewish identity.

Central to producing this transformative effect is the *mifgash* (encounter) that is part of each Birthright experience. The *mifgash* involves a group of Israeli peers joining the Diaspora youth for all or part of each trip. Given the program's exclusive focus on 18 to 26 year olds, the Israeli peers are typically soldiers. The power of the *mifgash* is reflected in the fact that it alters the identities of Israeli participants as well those of Diaspora Jews; they, too, come away feeling not just that they are Israelis doing service for the State of Israel, but that they are also linked by history and culture to a larger group of Jews.

Those who study social identity formation recognize that it does not take much for individuals to identify with a group. What social psychologists call "minimal group identification" can, however, have powerful effects. Although ten days is not, by the standards of most educational initiatives, a lengthy period, by the criteria of what it takes to form a sense of groupness, it is a very long time.

One outcome of Birthright Israel participants' enhanced sense of being part of the Jewish People is that they return from Israel highly motivated to recruit others to participate. The program both fosters Jewish social networks and

expands these networks by leveraging them to engage new participants. The more who go on the ten-day trips, the more applicants seek subsequent trips. As one indicator of interest in the program, summer registration for Birthright Israel opened in North America in mid-February of this year. Within 24 hours, nearly 15,000 applicants registered to participate. An additional 25,000 completed applications over the next two weeks for one of the 20,000 coveted slots expected to be available.

The as-yet unresolved question about Birthright Israel is whether alumni will maintain their newly-stimulated identification with the Jewish People. It's possible that feeling a sense of Peoplehood is a transitory phenomenon — a fond memory but not a lasting element of their identities. When participants return home, almost universally, they report being attitudinally changed and, particularly when compared to others who have not been on a trip, it is clear that they are fundamentally changed as well. But these same, highly motivated participants find it difficult to enact their identities by becoming active in Jewish communities where they live or go to school.

There are exceptions, and those who have gone on trips with members of their own communities (campus and otherwise) are more likely to find and join a Jewish community when they return. But most are unable to find a community that is as compelling as what they experienced as part of a group traveling in Israel. Herein lies the real opportunity.

Birthright Israel provides a taste of the honey of Jewish Peoplehood. For ten days, it creates a cultural island that allows participants to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. It provides educational experiences that are cognitively rich, emotionally stimulating and behaviorally engaging. The program provides a framework for identification with the Jewish People and, at least on a small scale, opportunities to engage in this identity.

The level of interest in the program is both a proximal and a distal indicator of its success. In the immediate sense, it indicates the success of program educators to engage participants. In the long term, if the program continues to attract a large stream of new recruits, it increases the likelihood that participants will have peer communities to join once they return. If the program can send close to 50,000 young adults from North America each year, it will enable more than 50 percent of that cohort of Jews to travel to Israel by their mid-twenties. It will have made an educational experience in Israel normative for American Jews and, perhaps, a tipping point will have been reached where being part of the Jewish People becomes fully expressed.

Long ago, the schools of Hillel and Shammai debated whether study or action should have primacy. Clearly,

Birthright Israel provides a taste of the honey of Jewish Peoplehood. For ten days, it creates a cultural island that allows participants to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves.

the two are intertwined. In the Diaspora, Jewish education has floundered, perhaps because the study of Jewish tradition is meaningless without enactment and interaction. The success of Birthright Israel derives from incorporating multiple forms of learning, and from its central message of group identification.

Furthermore, Birthright Israel is successful because it allows young adult Jews to experience life as a part of a Jewish community. In an era in which individualism is privileged over the communal, the behavioral lesson of Jewish Peoplehood taught by Birthright Israel is, perhaps, revolutionary. It is, however, the essence of what Jewish tradition is about, and it provides a path for a new generation of adults to find meaningful connection in a confusing world. ■

THE Idea OF THE Jewish People

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

As of late, “Jewish Peoplehood” has become a new rallying cry in the Jewish communal world similar to the way “Jewish Continuity” was the preferred slogan in the wake of the findings of the 1990 Jewish Population Survey. As a student of the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, I am wary of the swallowing up of Kaplan’s original and nuanced term into the machine of empty rhetoric that is used simplistically as a call for Jewish unity without defining who the Jews are and what is their reason for being. When Peoplehood is not defined substantively, its meaning is left to speculation that can justifiably assume a narrow xenophobia, tribalism, even racism on the part of those who champion the idea of the Jewish People.

Contrary to such speculation, however, the Peoplehood of Israel, from its earliest articulations in the Hebrew Bible to the Universalist Zionist thought of Kaplan, Martin Buber and A. D. Gordon, has been informed by a tradition of openness, universal mission and an affirmation of the value of all human beings that stands in tension with competing traditions of who the Jewish people should be. That is, different Jews at

different times in history have had different notions of what the Jewish people is or might be. I will attempt to present a number of highlights that point in an abbreviated way to one possible articulation of the idea of the Jewish People.

In the Hebrew Bible, there is a continuous strand of outlook that posits the Jewish People, or Israel, as a dialectical hybrid of birth and choice, blood

and faith. In the Biblical narrative, Israel, from its beginning, is not a single tribe but a cluster of tribes. Birth is important, but it is not everything. A constant thematic refrain challenges the privileges of the first born: Isaac replaces the older Ishmael, Jacob usurps the firstborn Esau, Judah takes prominence over the older Reuben, Menasheh takes second place when Jacob extends his right hand of blessing to the younger Ephraim. This value of the usurpation of primogeniture highlights the notion that while birth is central to the Covenant of Israel, it is not exclusively determinative.

Likewise, at the moment of the Exodus from Egypt, the text exhorts us to remember the Exodus experience in the future by re-enacting every year the memory of having tasted the Paschal Offering, whose blood secured the redemption of the children of Israel (*Exodus 12:37-50*). That same passage then makes it clear that if there are “strangers” living with us, not born of the Covenant, who also want to taste of the Paschal Offering and remember the Exodus with us, they should be encouraged to do so as long as the males among them are willing to show profound commitment by undergoing the blood of circumcision. That is, joining the Covenant of Israel is extended to those not born

as Israelites not as an afterthought in the Torah but at the foundational moment of Jewish Peoplehood, the Exodus from Egypt. This passage even begins with mention that a “great mixing” of people not born Israelites left Egypt together with those genealogically descended from the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

The Hebrew Bible goes out of its way continuously to prescribe the just treatment and love of strangers whether or not they choose to join their blood to the People of Israel. We are told to do that because “You were strangers in the land of Egypt.” In fact, in a very telling passage in the Book of Exodus (22:20 – 23:9), the enterprise of creating a just society is framed, at the passage’s beginning and end, by the prescription to not mistreat the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. The just society that Israel is meant to create is the “Anti-Egypt.” A central characteristic of that society is openness to the other.

Egypt, it should be remembered, was not only a brutal society in which Israel suffered, but the most powerful empire of its day. Its sovereignty was not limited to the straits of the Nile. Indeed, Egypt ruled over what would be known as the land of Israel well past what we assume to have been the conquest of the land. In other words, the formulation of the just society of Israel in its land is set not only in contradistinction to a memory called Egypt but in conflict with the Empire against which Israel revolts (see Norman Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel*, 2001). Whether it was Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece or Rome, our stories, holidays and commemorations are full of the memory of an ongoing conflict with Empire. When the Book of Deuteronomy teaches us how to go about selecting a king, we are warned to make sure that such a king cannot aggrandize wealth, women and horses to himself (*Deuteronomy 17:14-20*). He cannot return the people to Egypt. In other

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words, he cannot make of himself an emperor; Israel is not meant to be an Empire. Rather, as the Book of Isaiah articulates, Israel is meant to be a “Covenantal People; A light of nations” (*Isaiah 42:6*). The Jewish stand against empire is made in many ways, from the revolts against both Pharaoh and Rome to the spiritual discipline of the Sabbath, which teaches us to recognize both the wholeness of creation and our limitations in the universe.

Biblical Covenantal Openness is demonstrated in a pointed way in the Book of Ruth. Ruth is born of a supposedly hated people, the Moabites, but she is the great-grandmother of

obligation to welcome the stranger and to accept the sojourner into the Covenant. Obviously, the Biblical tradition is not univocal; it offers contradictory answers to the question of who the Jewish People is meant to be in relation to others. Again, there are competing visions throughout Jewish history from which we have the freedom to choose.

This is highlighted by the famous Talmudic story in Tractate Shabbat concerning a series of non-Jews who approach both Hillel and Shammai to be converted to Judaism (*TB Shabbat 31a*). In each case, the non-Jew offers impossible conditions for his conversion. Shammai harshly

extended family, and it is one which is meant to have an open adoption policy. In our foundational texts, being born into this extended family is of co-equal value with choosing to be a member of this family. Yes, it would be easier to define being Jewish either as a closed line of familial descent or as a system of values and wisdom divorced completely from the notion of birth and family. That being Jewish is both of birth and of choice, of belonging to an extended family and subscribing to a wisdom and spiritual tradition, makes the definition of Jewish Peoplehood complex and essentially of a dialectical nature. The idea of the Jewish People cannot be neatly fit into either/or categories of nation, religion, biology or culture. Because the Covenantal Family of the Jewish People combines birth and choice, its very existence teaches the values of both openness and belonging as well as the value that affirms both the particular and the universal at once. Abraham is told that he will become a great nation for the purpose that all the families of the earth will be blessed. Jewish particularism is meant to realize a universal goal. The universalism of our tradition does not negate the particular.

The idea of the Jewish People is indispensable to Judaism. That is, the values that Judaism teaches are best realized and learned through the medium of living together in the human community of Peoplehood rather than through the abstract intellection of an isolated individual's personal process. The Covenantal Family that is the Jewish people does not exist for the sake of its own survival but in order to demonstrate the values of Judaism in its example to others and to the world. This is an open family, not a closed one. This is a family with a mission greater than its own existence. Perhaps such an articulation of the idea of the Jewish People can be helpful to those looking for reasons to be excited about the new-found call of Jewish Peoplehood. ■

Joining the Covenant of Israel is extended to those not born as Israelites not as an afterthought in the Torah but at the foundational moment of Jewish Peoplehood, the Exodus from Egypt.

King David, who represents the future wholeness of the People of Israel. His genealogical line is at once established and clear, leading back to Judah, at the same time that it includes a progenitor who has chosen to make the fate of Israel her own. There is birth and there is choice. The choice that Ruth makes is one of joining a family and a people. It is clear that the Book of Ruth belongs to a Biblical tradition of Covenantal Openness in tension with that Biblical tradition that casts the Moabites as not only hated but as forbidden to Israelites for marriage.

The Covenantal Openness of the Hebrew Bible also stands in stark contrast to an alternative Biblical tradition that exhorts the Israelites to exterminate non-Israelites whom they encounter upon the conquest of the land. Given archeological evidence, we can surmise that this wiping out of Canaanite peoples not only never happened but represents an anachronistic wish from the Deuteronomic period contradicted by the Biblical

rejects each applicant. Hillel gently takes each of them in and subsequently shows them, pedagogically, why their conditions do not make sense. Over the generations, we have been able to choose whether to follow the model of Hillel or that of Shammai. Three hundred years after the time of Hillel and Shammai, it had become virtually illegal in the Roman Empire for Jews to convert others to Judaism. It is not surprising that that edict became internalized in Jewish understandings of conversion, and led to later Talmudic statements comparing converts to a boil on the body of Israel. The question for our day is whether to recognize that we no longer live under the province of an Empire hostile to the Jewish people and whether we are ready to return to the open spirit of both Hillel and the Book of Exodus.

It is no accident that the narrative of the People of Israel begins in the Book of Genesis with the story of a family. The Jewish People is an

PEOPLEHOOD IN ACTION:

A VIEW FROM A CORPORATE EXECUTIVE

In my work at a multinational corporation, I never thought I'd find sustenance in the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. And yet, I recently found myself drawing inspiration and creativity from the idea of *clal Yisrael* in a global assignment that had nothing to do with Judaism.

Our company is headquartered in New York City, but we have offices in dozens of cities throughout the world. As part of a restructuring assignment, I was asked to corral these communities under a shared vision and culture. My team was to create bonds and locate commonalities between employees in Brazil, the United States, Greece, China and everywhere else in between. As each local community had its own distinct culture and practices, the challenge was obvious: to unify business satellites in far-flung and often disparate locales under a single rubric that would attract top-notch employees and clients. Not a small task.

As a Jew — and, therefore, as a member of the global Jewish people — I soon realized that my own tradition and heritage offered an interesting parallel. As we look at the Jewish people, whether in Argentina, Hungary, Australia or Tel Aviv, what compelling basis do we have for connection? From my own

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travels throughout the world, I noticed several characteristics of what we know as Jewish Peoplehood: a responsibility to a historic com-

mitment; a pride in that commitment and a desire to sustain it; rituals that transcend continental divide; a wish to be part of a community; communications channels to share best practices and information between communities and potentially with a center; a need for leadership development to ensure a successful future; and an inclination to participate in *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*.

These shared values and goals create the possibility of a global people that is open to connecting and sharing, regardless of whether its constituents come from different local cultures or whether their lives interact on a day-to-day basis.

It occurred to me that the very basis of Jewish Peoplehood was a perfect model for our work. My team began to consider how to create an infrastructure that would foster a similarly compelling reason for people in different cities and countries to participate in shared practices. Key to our strategy was the concept of independence with accountability.

We redefined our vision to make it generic enough to work across borders, but inspiring enough to promote local relevancy. People began to feel satisfaction belonging to a company that valued concepts in which they could take pride locally. We created programs that were based on proven sound business practices but that also could be customized for local understanding. We created forums for discus-

sion in person and on-line to share best practices around how we identify, attract and retain top talent in a competitive marketplace. We had a long-term view. We had a lot of patience. We did a lot of research to understand local cultural norms and motivations. We explained to each of our satellites that in the past, we had allowed each country to operate as an island as long as they provided best-in-class work and were profitable. Now we would transform ourselves into a company that would require participation in certain global processes around effective talent scouting, employee development and identification and retention of future leaders. These traits will keep us ahead of our competitors in the global economy.

We then started to require participation in the programming through an annual process in which local office management would report to central global management on their achievements against specific criteria that they had created together. The key to success in this realm is ongoing conversation, recognition of top offices that embraced the processes and programs with great success, and mutual respect for cultural differences.

Our company has become more competitive and a more compelling place to work. Now that we have consistent global processes, our employees participate more successfully in international opportunities. Local management can depend on peers in different countries to share best practices and even clients.

Naturally, it is difficult to compare a multinational corporation with a religion and culture. And yet, in some respects, our business has thrived off a uniquely Jewish concept. Like the global Jewish people, our corporation now celebrates individualism while helping our employees achieve that core human need of belonging to a larger community. ■

KAPLAN AND COMMUNITY

by RABBI JOY LEVITT

For Mordecai Kaplan, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the Twentieth Century, belonging to the Jewish people was central to the Jewish experience. A person might or might not believe in God or Jewish rituals (though incidentally, he both believed and practiced), but as Jews we share a civilization that has spanned thousands of years with a common history, language, literature, music and tradition. While other denominations of Jewish life emphasize behavior and/or belief as the primary aspect of Jewish identity, Kaplan focused

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primary on the third “b” — belonging. The JCC in Manhattan embodies this idea of the centrality of Jewish Peoplehood.

We know that people bring a variety of beliefs (or perhaps none at all) and behaviors when they walk through our doors. We embrace pluralism in the belief that diversity strengthens Jewish life. When you walk into the JCC on Shabbat afternoon, for example, you have multiple options. You can join more than 500 people working out, take a yoga class, listen to chamber music or study Jewish texts. You can see a film that relates to the theme of the morning's Torah portion, or do origami with your child. All of it is free and open to everyone. We make it comfortable for observant Jews to participate (there is a Shabbat elevator and public spaces are free from amplified music), and we make no judgments about individual practice. We take the central notion articulated by Ahad Ha-am — “More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews” — and we breathe life into it by providing opportunities for individuals and families to

experience Shabbat as a gift to the community.

By embracing all aspects of life, we broaden the definition of Jewishness beyond the scope of religion as traditionally understood. We teach swimming at the JCC not only because it's fun and because parents want their children to learn how to swim. We teach swimming because our tradition understands the supreme importance of being able to save a life — one's own or someone else's — and being able to swim means someday perhaps being able to do just that. And when we're doing our job right, parents and children know that learning to swim is a deeply Jewish thing to do.

Jews enter Jewish life through various doorways. Our job is to make sure we keep the doors open, and, more importantly, that when Jews look inside they will see a place where they can belong. And when they cross the threshold and find themselves sharing things in common with Jews who came through a different door, then we know we have begun to turn “belonging” into “connecting.” At that point, we are on the path to a renewed Jewish community. ■

SEVEN THESES ON HEBREW AND JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

by ALAN MINTZ

1. Hebrew is the deep structure of Jewish civilization. Hebrew accumulates meanings in an alluvial sense, never becoming depleted. The disused meanings of terms are retained and held in potential simultaneity with the meanings that have usurped them. When Zionist farmers needed terms for their agricultural work, the *realia* of Mishnah were there to be mobilized. *Ve'ahavta* contains the arc of divine love as mandated in the *Sh'ma* as well as the psychological reticulations of the modern experience of love. The fact that *bitahon* can turn in the direction of either trust in God or military security tells us something about the protean potential of Hebrew. In short, Hebrew provides a plastic medium in which the contradictions and subversions of Jewish culture can be negotiated.

2. Hebrew, in far more than a figurative sense, is the unitary key to Jewish culture. It is the incredible — one might say miraculous — fortune of the Jewish People that its ancient language and its modern language lie within close conversational distance from one another. A Jew who can read a poem by Yehuda Amichai can understand large sections of Genesis, and vice versa. It is the “vice versa” of Hebrew that makes it such a powerful tool. The fact that one key can open so many doors is a strong argument for concentrating our resources on finding ways to make the acquisition of this key more widely attainable.

3. “Knowing Hebrew” is a modular, rather than an all-or-nothing, enter-

prise. Even if one knows some aspects of the language, there are great gains to be derived in access to the treasury of Jewish texts and cultural referents. So, for example, if one has not mastered the Hebrew verb system but has learned to recognize the permutations of some of the key three-letter verb stems — say, *ts.d.k*, *z.kh.r.* or *y.ts.r.*, one is in the exciting position of suddenly seeing how the permutations of these roots interlace to create the fabric of Jewish thought.

4. The enormous outpouring of translations from classical Hebrew sources is cause for both celebration and consternation. On the one hand, this phenomenon represents an admirable democratization of Jewish learning; on the other, it conduces to a belief that the Hebrew original is simply an obstacle to be overcome as well as a medium for messages that can be better, or at least more rapidly, understood in English. There is virtually no sense of the sacrifice and renunciation — however necessary they may be — inherent in the reliance on translation. Translation that acts as an adjutant to understanding the original is a far cry from translation that effaces the original.

5. Hebrew is a potential bridge between the observant and non-observant communities. This proposition is self-evident in Israel, where Hebrew is the shared linguistic medium; even in the Haredi world, Hebrew has increasingly become the standard for daily life. To be sure, this commonality often serves only to underscore the radically divergent experiences of the two communities. At the same time, however, as a portal of return and reconnection for Israelis who wish to explore their Judaism, Hebrew provides the kind of automatic access that is largely absent in Diaspora Jewish life. Yet even within the parameters of American Jewry,

Hebrew remains — and is gaining ground, especially as manifest in textual proficiency — as a key marker of professional achievement in Jewish education, the rabbinate, the cantorate, and academic Jewish Studies across all denominational lines. Lay leaders increasingly recognize that knowing Hebrew is an essential goal, even if they often regard it as one beyond their attainment.

6. Hebrew is a potential bridge between Israel and the Diaspora. The asymmetry is stark: Almost all literate Israelis know English; very few literate American Jews can manage a sentence in the Jewish national language. Yet anyone who has learned even some Israeli Hebrew knows that it goes a long way toward granting access to the inner struggles of Israeli society beyond the media — and fundraising — images. There are possibilities of reciprocity, as well. The Hebrew of American Jews tends to be a mixture of the Hebrew of the prayerbook and Torah study and Israeli conversational practices — so that when we speak *our* Hebrew, however haltingly, we enact the richness of our Jewish identities in conversation with our Israeli brethren.

7. Hebrew, finally, is a point of consensus among the contentious and divergent parties in Jewish life. It is protean in its prestige, being not necessarily religious and not necessarily secular and definitively fused with Israel. Even if this prestige is often only lip service, the unexploited potential of this moral capital is enormous. For there are so very precious few sancta of Jewish life that cut across so many boundaries and maintain such a high level of acceptability. The protean nature of Hebrew is no conceit. Hebrew is the joystick of Jewish life, and it can be pushed in a number of directions to enrich and accelerate substantive Jewish identity. ■

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Beyond the Am

A Different Perspective on Peoplehood

by DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF

We have internalized the faulty, racist arguments of the peoples whose provincial gods and beliefs we refused to accept — and, in the process, accepted a similarly provincial, race-based and limited view of the Jewish project.

Perhaps the most compelling and dangerous misconception held by Jews today is that the longevity of Judaism is dependent on our ability to cling to a rather specious claim of Peoplehood. For while there is great comfort to be found in the mythological origins of a Jewish People chronicled in the Torah, when they become the foundation for a sense of racial or historical entitlement, they undermine the very premise of Judaism.

To be sure, Jewish myth and history are both rife with proclamations of our Peoplehood. It's just that these assertions are usually made by our worst enemies, looking for a justification to wipe us out. It was Pharaoh who first used the term “am,” or a people, in the Torah, as a way of identifying the Israelites who threatened to outbreed his loyal soldiers. The first references to a Jewish race, or blood, came during the Inquisition. Many Jews had converted to Catholicism, yet still maintained their foothold in the rising middle class of merchants. So the Inquisitors decreed that the practice of Judaism was no longer the crime; now it was simply having Jewish “blood.” Finally, it was Carl Jung who, interpreted through a Nazi lens, held that Jews carried a “genetic memory” for the sort of abstract thought that undermined any fascistic enterprise.

The irony, of course, is that over centuries of illegitimate persecution, Jews have come to accept the logic of their detractors

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as their own. We have internalized the faulty, racist arguments of the peoples whose provincial gods and beliefs we refused to accept — and, in the process, accepted a similarly provincial, race-based and limited view of the Jewish project. As a result, we forget that we are an intentional amalgam of peoples, or even that a “People” might possibly be united by choice instead of by a supreme creator.

Even a cursory understanding of Torah reveals that the shared heritage described in Genesis was a story borrowed from other faith systems and repurposed to serve as a reunion myth for the disparate nomadic tribes rebelling against Egyptian rule. The first hearers of Torah surely understood the inside jokes, as the sons of Jacob were used as caricatured stand-ins for traits that had become associated with each of the tribes.

Judaism — if we can even call it that — was as much a set of principles through which a people could behave ethically as it was a religion in any modern sense of the word. What distinguished this new way of life — what made it an exodus from the death cults of Egypt — was that it was not considered a pre-existing condition of the universe.

Whereas the laws other people followed had always been tied to place and local gods, the Israelite system was to be universal. More than anything, it was the invention of text which made this possible. With the power of the alphabet, it would be people and not only priests who could read the law. More importantly, it would be people who could write the law.

This is the revolution described in Exodus: a group of tribes gathered

together to write their own laws in support of life. *Lchaim* isn't just a song from *Fiddler on the Roof* — it is a declaration of independence, and a profound assertion of living agency in the face of formerly inviolable decrees.

As media theorist Walter Ong has pointed out, the transition from oral culture to literate culture is not without its problems. Text is necessarily abstract, disconnected from its writer in a way that the spoken word could never be. But it also allows for a new sort of memory and accountability.

That's why the covenant was written in the form of a contract. Imagine that: Jews received God through a contractual arrangement. And then we continued to negotiate this relationship, as well as our ethical obligations, over centuries of legal discussions known as the Talmud. It is an open source religion.

This is the prime advantage of the abstract monotheism that text permitted: instead of depending on a particular place or racial makeup, Judaism would be defined by a set of behaviors. We belong through our actions.

This is not to say that Judaism is devoid of particularism. It's simply that racism, nationalism and particularism are different things, not to be confused with one another, and not at all interdependent. What makes Judaism particular — different than, say, joining the ACLU or doing just works — lies in the motivations for action. Jews find their strength in their shared stories, laws, history and community. We have to remember, though, which of these are the means and which are the ends. The object of the game is a just society,

whether or not those of us calling ourselves Jews ever get the credit.

If what makes Jews particular is our fictional history — whether mythic or genetic — then all is lost. We would have no choice but to practice in secret and distance ourselves from the rest of the world, like any other cult, to preserve our uniqueness. As our most fervent philanthropists fear, we would eventually either intermarry or fight ourselves into extinction. (Even the *Tanakh* demonstrates the need to bring new peoples into the mix, lest we fall victim to the infertility of too much inbreeding.) Luckily, even though ghettos and isolation have certainly dwindled our chromosomal variety, it's not our genes that define us at all. And while there are doubtlessly those who view the Torah as a literal (if contradictory) history, Judaism has always been open to movements that accept more allegorical understandings of our most sacred narratives.

What first made Judaism unique was the contention that human beings could write the law. Where earlier faiths operated under the presumption of pre-existing moral codes created by a deity and enacted by the deity's chosen leader, it was now up to human beings to engage with the sacred through a contract. Covenant became a two-sided contractual obligation. (Even a boy "born Jewish" isn't officially a Jew until he is circumcised.)

Of course, centuries of pressure by more traditional, parochial religions have borne their toll on Judaism. It's hard for Jews to engage with the world's many peoples with the clear-headedness of our ancestors — especially since we well understand the price for abandoning superstition and racism. The few

times in history we have insisted on maintaining our principles in the face of supreme rulers or fascist despots, we were met with harsh collective sentences. Dictators never like people who don't acknowledge the reality of their claims to natural sovereignty over a supposed family of people.

The trick, as I see it, will be to utilize a little more skillfully the brief reprieves we enjoy every few centuries. After World War II, for example, it was quite understandable why we'd accept a nation state as the world's apology for its reluctance to prevent numerous atrocities. But this may have been a moment for us to press our advantage. Instead of accepting the contemporary and limited notion of Peoplehood associated with a nation state, instead of demanding a place like the Irish, the Tibetans or any other regional people, we should have demanded what our persecutors most feared: universal citizenship.

Indeed, we must resist assimilation. Instead of accepting a plot of turf, an official church, and an externally defined classification of Peoplehood, we might better push for a relationship to the world that more accurately reflects what makes Judaism so particularly dangerous to the biased, xenophobic and territorial claims of the people amongst whom we have almost always lived.

Yes, it's easier to get along with everyone in the short term if we pretend we're just another people — another house of worship on the block. But to do so is to deny the premise that people can transcend false, mythological distinctions and instead pursue universal justice. If we're serious about Jewish continuity, it is this thread we must keep alive. ■

YIDDISH

THE **LIVING** LANGUAGE OF THE **JEWISH** PEOPLE

by **ROKHL KAFRISSEN**

A Jew of my acquaintance sat down near me in a Warsaw park and asked me why I was so sad.

"Graetz is dead," I answered.

"God's will!" said my acquaintance. "One of our townsfolk, I suppose?"

...When I informed my neighbor that Graetz was an historian who wrote the history of the Jewish people he commented:

"Oh history!" His voice had the same ring as if he were told that somebody had eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs at one time.

Just as I was about to get angry, he continued very naively:

"And what's the use of history?"

— From I.L. Peretz, *On History*
(Translated and Edited by Sol Liptzin, 1947)

I love this passage from Peretz's *On History*, and not just because it shows that Peretz had a deliciously dark sense of humor. Substitute "Yiddish" for "History" and you'll find a familiar bit of dialogue taken from my life as an evangelical (*lehavdil*) Yiddishist. Much of the Jewish world is, inexplicably, committed to the notion of the uselessness of Yiddish. Am I crazy? Or are they? (Wait, don't answer that yet.)

As an experiment, I set a Google alert for "Yiddish." Every day, Google sends me a long list of pages that make some reference to Yiddish. And nine times out of ten, the articles feature some permutation of "dead," "dying," "wiped out" or "kaddish." It's no surprise I've started unconsciously checking my pulse.

Google is usually right. But when it comes to Yiddish, I think one has to look a little bit deeper. So, what is the use of Yiddish? As Peretz would probably agree, we have to know our history and the history of Yiddish as a language of the Jewish people.

For centuries, Ashkenazic Jewry took a

very un-Jewish language and made it very Jewish. German bumped up against *Loshn-koydesh* (biblical Hebrew and Aramaic) in the formation of Yiddish, just as Jews and Christians encountered each other in real life. Jewish communities were self-contained and self-governing, with the Talmud providing the infrastructure of daily life. And yet, no matter how much their lives differed, Jews always interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors. Perhaps, like me, you had the same revelation upon visiting Poland for the first time. Borscht? Polish. Kasha varnishkes? Yup, that too. And don't get me started on the caraway seeds. Jewish culture was in constant dialog with its neighbors, above and beyond the culinary. But Yiddish — both the language and the culture — was the fence erected by Jews around themselves to control that dialog and protect the integrity of the community.

Through prosperity and peril, Yiddish was the buffer and filter that helped the Jews of Ashkenaz to flourish in non-Jewish lands. Like a Jewish photosynthesis, Yiddish took in the goyish and made it Jewish, constantly renewing Jewish culture and Jewish life. The most moving Hasidic *nigunim* (wordless tunes) began life as (non-Jewish) shepherd's tunes, beer hall songs and even national anthems. Noted Yiddish historian Michael Wex talks about how the Yiddish term *gezeygenen zikh* (to bid farewell) actually comes from a Latin (and then German) term meaning to cross oneself.

Yiddish allowed the Jews of Europe to live in a non-Jewish place and to absorb non-Jewish culture without fear. Yiddish was always on, always performing its peculiar alchemy, making everything, even the sign of the cross, Jewish.

Then along came modernity, and the *Haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment. Jews were free to become, for example, Germans of the Mosaic faith, as long as they could leave behind those Jewish characteristics not universal or religious.

Modernity seemed to demand that Jewishness be shrunk down to a religion, segregated to its appointed places (specifically the

synagogue) and mostly shorn of its own languages. Alas, there is no universal. There is only the individual, the detail, the particular. What else is Jewishness than a culture of distinctions and details?

Where assimilation was somewhat more difficult, as in Poland, the Yiddish intelligentsia attempted to create a modern Jewishness, one that didn't demand such a high price of entry as that of the German reformers. I.L. Peretz's Warsaw was one of the nodes on the new map of Yiddish modernism, and it glowed with the interchange of energies between worlds, traditional and modern, rural and urban, Jewish and non.

As the Jewish people of Eastern Europe became more varied (economically, politically, religiously), Yiddish, too, became more varied, growing to accommodate new Jews and new Jewish lives. And rather than shrinking Jewishness down to fit into synagogue time and synagogue space, modern Yiddish culture expanded to fill the lives of modern Jews streaming into urban centers. Whether or not they ever stepped foot in a shul, the lives of the Yiddish modernists were suffused with Jewishness — in their books, their songs, their cabarets and even their political movements. By speaking Yiddish, these modernists were never far from *Loshn-koydesh*, and the Jewish point of view, no matter how far they traveled. The Yiddish modernists (as well as plain old modern Yiddish speakers) were on their way to creating a truly liberating, modern Jewish culture, one in which different kinds of Jewish lives, secular and observant, enriched each other and moved each other forward. Sadly, we all know what happened next. It's true, as Google reminds me each morning, that the world in which my beloved Yiddish modernists lived was ruthlessly destroyed, wiped out, *is no more*.

And yet, the majority of American Jews come from Yiddish speaking backgrounds. Jewish popular culture in the U.S. is largely a product of Yiddish and Yiddish culture. One-third of Jewish all-day schools in the United States today use Yiddish as their main medium of teaching (Joshua A. Fishman, *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved*, Multilingual Matters Limited, 2001). According to the latest New York City census, there are about 82,000 Yiddish speakers in New York City. Contrast this with the approximately 48,000 Arabic speakers and 50,000 Hebrew speakers in the city. Yiddish is both our immediate history as well as a living part of the Jewish people. Personally, I learned more about Jewishness in four semesters of college Yiddish than I did in years of Conservative Hebrew school. If we are truly interested in strengthening Jewish life and culture, we would do well to understand the unique stature of Yiddish as a language of the Jewish People. We should think twice before writing off millions of Jews, and the history of millions more, as irrelevant. ■

Rokhl Kafriksen recently left the world of corporate litigation to become the web editor for *Jewish Currents* magazine. She is working on a book about American Jewish culture called *The Myth of the Yiddish Atlantis*.

The Many Hues of Jewish Peoplehood

by RUTH OUAZANA

“But I thought Sephardic Jews were small, ugly and dark... You are not like that! And I don't understand why you came here to help me.”

VILNIUS, WINTER 1994: This elderly woman, a widow of a General, was struggling with the reason why some young French Sephardic Jews were concerned enough about her People, past and future, that they had travelled all the way to Vilnius to hear her story. And we were surprised to discover how ill she thought of Sephardic Jews!

I grew up in France in a half-Moroccan, half-Tunisian family. From childhood on, I had the opportunity to interact with many Jews from other countries. Each time, I was surprised to discover that many of the values and concerns that I had as a Jew were the same as those of any other Jew. And this was not only a matter of religion or connection to Israel. It was more profound than that.

We know the complicated history of the Jews in Europe and around the Mediterranean. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, after centuries of ambivalence, distrust and frequent hostility, Jews obtained some rights and duties of regular citizens in most European countries. However, as the French revolutionary Count of Clermont-Tonnerre said regarding the citizenship of the Jews in 1791, “Everything for the Jews as individuals, nothing for them as a Nation.”

Henceforth, one was no longer a Jew in France, but a French citizen with a Jewish faith — an “Israélite.” In the Twentieth Century, many of these Israélites did not want to be associated with “the Jews” from Eastern Europe who came fleeing the Nazis, and yet they perished in the same camps. Peoplehood

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has a way of clinging to you even if you try to escape its clutches.

Things changed in the 1960s, after the end of the French colonial era, when Jews left North Africa for France *en masse* to bring new blood, practice and ideas; a new pride in being a Jew, in the words of my grandmother Gaby Yarhi, in “the Country of Victor Hugo and of Human Rights.” Also, in 1967, the Six Day War

installed a political conscience about Israel and the importance of keeping it safe.

Today, the largest Jewish communities in Europe are in France, England and Hungary. Other communities struggle, with a few thousand Jews, to maintain a Jewish life. How do we keep alive the richness of our traditional culture while remaining in the countries of our birth?

For years, it has been said that it was thanks to religion that Jews remained Jews. But these days, with so many Israeli Jews opposed to religion, and with so many Jews throughout the world choosing to live secular lives, this claim is less reliable. There was also once the claim that thanks to the creation of Israel, Jews would at last be safe. But Israel has not solved the problem of anti-Semitism, nor has it been chosen as a homeland by much of world

Jewry. Now more than ever, we must articulate a new, inclusive notion of Jewish Peoplehood that might help us overcome the challenges of assimilation and the loss of Jewish values.

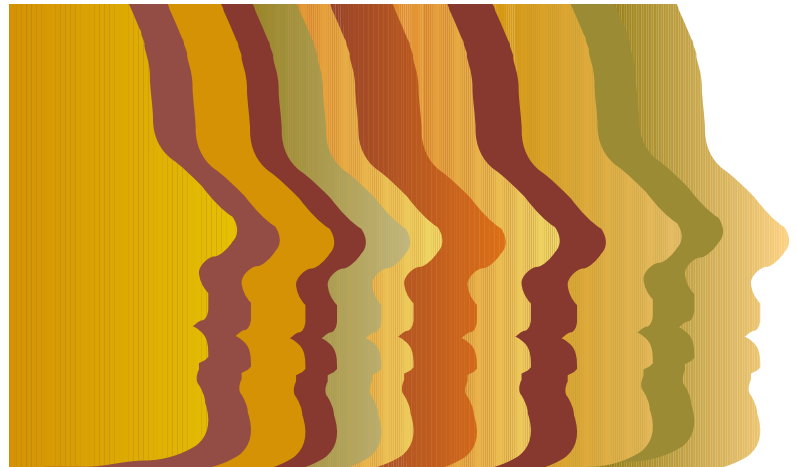
René-Samuel Sirat, former Great Rabbi of France, has summarised the issue beautifully: “What is mandatory for both Jews from the Diaspora and Jews from Israel is the feeling of being part of the same People. The notion of Jewish Peoplehood is difficult to understand. This notion does not fit into the usual norms of thinking. For thousands of years, Jews did not live in the same territory, were not subjects of the same king, did not speak the same language. However, in the suffering of the exile, in the imposed ghettos, in the necessity of leaving everything behind in order to save their lives and practise their religion, they

always considered as a fundamental value their belonging to the Jewish People.” (René-Samuel Sirat and Martine Lemalet, *La tendresse de Dieu*, Nil Editions, 1996)

Some European initiatives have been taken to revitalize European Jewry. Some, such as Paideia, the European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden; the European leadership programme of Israel Connect; or the range of activities organized by the European Union of Jewish Students, aim their efforts at young European leaders.

Other programs are meant for broader participation. In England, a new concept has revolutionized the notion of Jewish Peoplehood, bringing it within everyone's reach. Limmud, the Festival of Jewish Learning, was created in 1980, and began to spread around the world in 2000. It now reaches about 40 countries on four continents, and it continues to grow at an amazing rate.

One of the reasons for Limmud's success is that it reinforces a feeling of being part of the Jewish People; no matter whether you are Ultra-Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, secular or completely unaffiliated; no matter your age or your country, you are part of the Jewish People. Furthermore, the organization



is run entirely by volunteers, giving each of us the opportunity to actively do something Jewish: learn, share and give.

Limmud's conferences succeed in attracting many Jews who would otherwise have left the community, thus enhancing future Jewish leaders and presenting the full diversity and values of the Jewish People.

I now live in England, with a British Ashkenazi partner, and the Jewish community is almost like at home. The food is different, the melodies are different, but so is England. And I know that if we decide to move elsewhere in the world, we will always find this warm feeling of discovering another branch of the family — whether it's in Italy, Argentina, Israel, the United States, Australia or Lithuania. Wherever we find ourselves, we will also find new dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood. ■

Peoplehood WITH PURPOSE

by YOSEF ISRAEL ABRAMOWITZ

Every once in a while, mostly when I'm feeling like the Jewish People are drifting, I reach into a basket next to my bed, pull out a small black velvet bag and take out a heavy, 200-year-old French coin. It is French. Napoleon is on one side; flip the coin over and Napoleon is there, too, this time receiving the Ten Commandments from a weakened and humbled Moses. The coin celebrates the acceptance by the Jewish people of a New World Order under the Rights of Man.

The historic choice made by the French *Sanhedrin* in answering Napoleon's challenge — to define themselves as “Frenchmen of the Mosaic Faith,” rather than as part of the Jewish People — ushered in a new era for humanity and for the Jewish People. Eviscerating our national characteristics paved the way for Jewish individuals as well as for Judaism, both in law and in the public imagination, to be equal to Christians and to Christianity.

The culture of individualism that is so quintessentially American accelerated the equality of Jews and of Judaism. The greatest public relations coup of the Twentieth Century for American Jewry was the mainstreaming of the term “Judaico-Christian,” which meant that 2 percent of the population had not only equality with the super majority of Americans, but even top billing. This served our community's public policy interests and assimilationist yearnings.

This remarkable achievement must now be undone, and the artificial Napoleonic split of the essence of our People must be mended.

There is a drastic need for a paradigm shift in planning for a strong Jewish future. With American Jewry having the highest attrition rates of any religious

group as well as the lowest belief-in-God quotient, the 200-year compact the Jewish People have had with Western Civilization, and with each other, needs to be altered. Appeals to religious solidarity are ineffective in a Jewish values vacuum. We have to set our sights higher than those of most of our demographers, sociologists, community planners and philanthropists and become advocates for a vision of inspired Jewish Peoplehood in the Twenty-First Century.

Jewish Peoplehood — and its universalistic, noble purpose — must replace the eroding definition of Jews as essentially a faith community.

Neither faith nor nationalism can continue to be the grand, unifying field theories of world Jewry. Only Peoplehood can, because it is inherently inclusive and encompasses religion, nationalism and culture.

The goal should be for a critical mass of our institutions, endeavors, philanthropists and leaders to be engines and agents of Peoplehood.

How can we accomplish this? By recognizing that Jewish values are the building blocks of vibrant Jewish Peoplehood. Jewish values must be the new DNA of our religion, nationalism and culture. They have always been there, but we usually fail at crystallizing what they are, where they came from, how they can be expressed in everyday life and how they inform the actions of our people. Likewise, we have failed to link them to a larger mission for the Jewish People.

Shared values are a trademark of a people. They can be equally relevant to those who consider themselves faith Jews as they can to those whose Judaism is more a matter of nation or culture. And Jewish values are not owned by any denomination, political party or kind of Jew. We will need to define Jewish values in order to enable them to be shared.

What are Jewish values? BabagaNewz, sponsored by AVI CHAI, is an award-winning Jewish values-based kids' magazine, website and teacher's guide. The Baba-

gaNewz educational team has been teaching two kinds of Jewish values to kids in 3,500 classrooms: distinctive Jewish values and those values that are shared with other faith communities or with Western Civilization. There are actually very few distinctive Jewish values — *Talmud Torah*, *Yediat Eretz Yisrael*, *Areivut*, etc. — so we seem to share most of our values with others.

Yet, we must be moral archaeologists and dig deeper into those values to find the distinctive Jewish differentiation in either defining, understanding or, most importantly, expressing and acting on those values, particularly in the context of community. We need to align the educational institutions, or at least the messages, across world Jewry's institutions and instruments of communication to promote Jewish values.

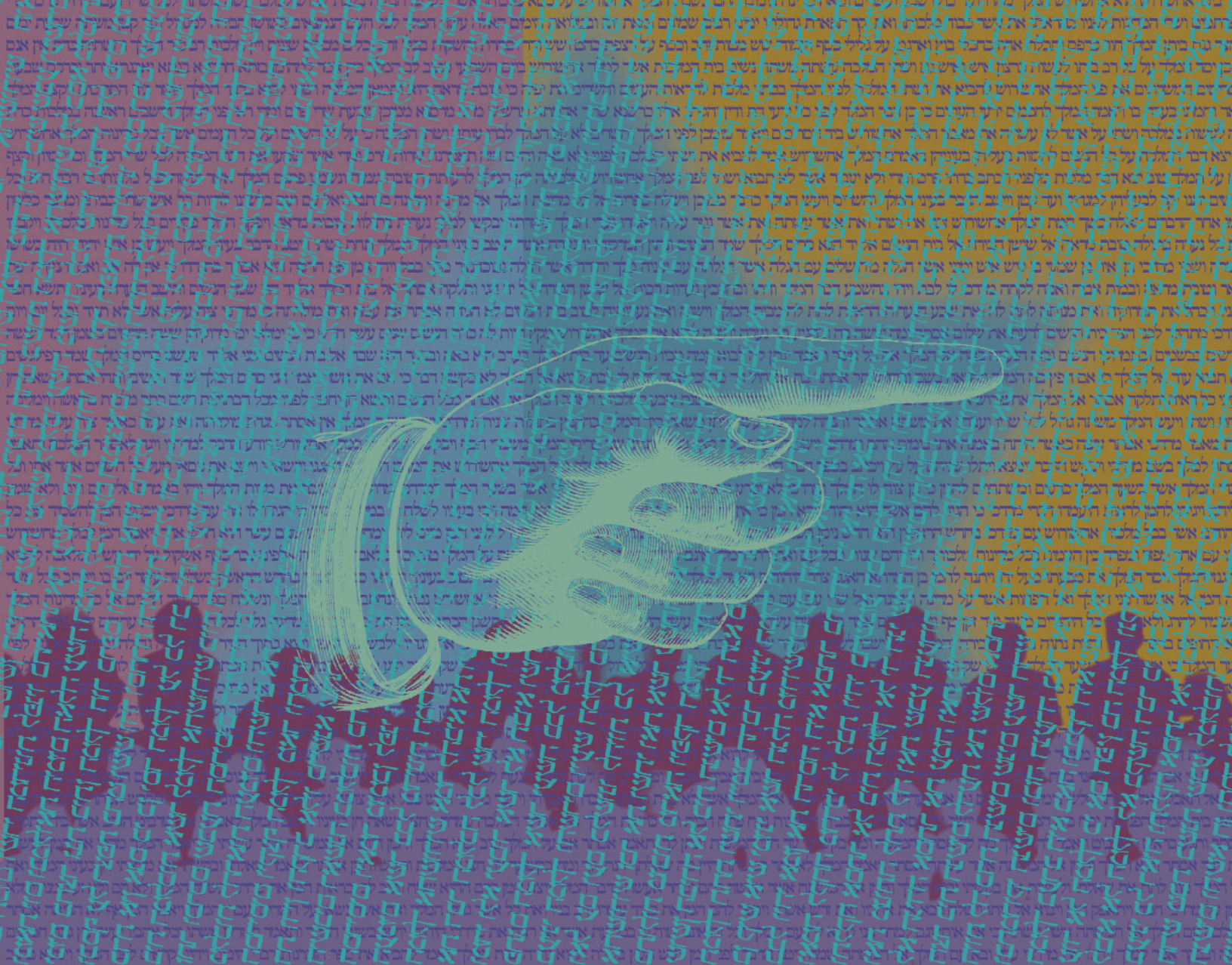
Jewish values are most effectively lived not only in the context of interdependency of people, but also in relation to Jewish time and to Jewish action. When Christianity elevated the place of belief over action, it divorced values from obligation. When Jews come together and synthesize values, time and action, our moral contribution is most powerful. It is an expression of Jewish Peoplehood's greatest attributes.

Our struggle for communal re-definition is not isolated. It is mirrored in the State of Israel and in other Jewish communities around the world. This would suggest the need for a core curriculum of Jewish values from which all educational endeavors could draw and hopefully coordinate in a rubric of “Peoplehood Time.” Making the celebration each year of global Jewish Social Action Month during the month of *Cheshvan* is another example of Peoplehood Time in this new era.

A word of caution: Peoplehood will not work as a rallying cry to the Jewish public, which is post-tribal in its inclinations and commitments. Peoplehood is, rather, an organizing principle to recalibrate and synthesize the Jewish enterprise and philanthropy. It is our future blueprint.

Because the centripetal forces of Western Civilization are more powerful on the

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individual than are the gravitational forces of Peoplehood, we must increase the density of Peoplehood in order to increase its gravitational pull. This density is created by promoting shared Jewish values and particularism (without parochialism) through formal and informal education. And this education must look anew at every ritual, holiday, Torah portion and law with a view to redefining them in the context of rededicating the Jewish People toward a purpose.

I argue that the purpose of the Jewish People — the essence of Jewish Peoplehood — is to be an *ongoing, distinctive catalyst* for the advancement and evolution of

morality in civilization.

It is *ongoing* because I am not so faithful to the messianic idea in Judaism; I believe civilization will always need us to be its moral *nudniks*.

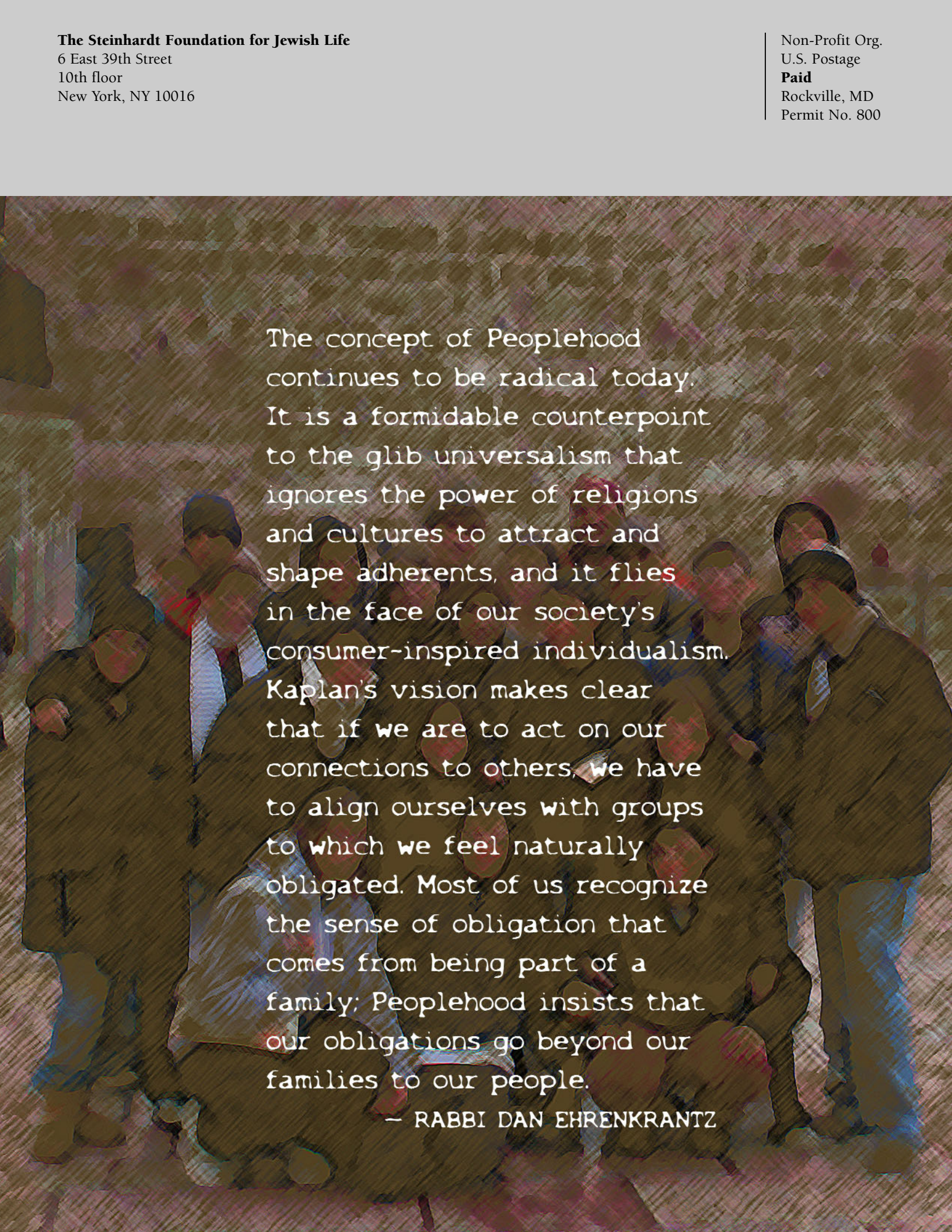
It is *distinctive* in that we are a unique people, with a unique reading of the human condition, with a unique history, religion, heritage and culture. Maintaining our distinctiveness in an era of cultural globalization is a prerequisite for maintaining our place and role in history.

And on a planet with close to seven billion souls, we can realistically be a *catalyst* only toward systemic changes rather than the giant implementers of change (and

frankly, the catalyst role is basically how it has worked for four thousand years).

In a digital age, we can connect more.

The more Jews are connected, the more they will express, at the very least, a familial *areivut* — mutual responsibility — toward each other. And if we are able to mobilize the collective Jewish imagination to help not only ourselves but also the entire world, then we will have something durable to pass along to future generations of Jews. Instilling a sense of Peoplehood With Purpose, we will be able to answer the age-old question of “Why Be Jewish?” for at least our era and maybe the next. ■



The concept of Peoplehood continues to be radical today. It is a formidable counterpoint to the glib universalism that ignores the power of religions and cultures to attract and shape adherents, and it flies in the face of our society's consumer-inspired individualism. Kaplan's vision makes clear that if we are to act on our connections to others, we have to align ourselves with groups to which we feel naturally obligated. Most of us recognize the sense of obligation that comes from being part of a family; Peoplehood insists that our obligations go beyond our families to our people.

— RABBI DAN EHRENKRANTZ